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Modernist poetry and the canon

The process by which canonical reputations are made is more finely grained, subtly contextualised, and gradual, than many literary critics, with ideological axes to grind, acknowledge. The mechanisms of cultural influence that brought about the revolution of poetic taste associated with modernism were extremely complex and variegated: manifestoes, prefaces, introductions; vigorous and partisan debates in newspapers and literary magazines; selections in anthologies; pamphlets, essays and full-length studies; not forgetting the impact of modernist movements beyond the English-speaking world. The intellectual historian must seek to gauge the socioeconomic conditions in which modernist poetry was mediated and received, even the effects of intangibles (such as private conversation) that have now seeped into the shifting sands of canon formation. Taken together, attempts to reconstruct this intricate constellation of factors can leave accounts of the modernist canon a little under-explained. However, the main thread to follow does emerge clearly with the benefit of historical hindsight: it involves tracing the emergence of the new poetic in the avant-garde 'little magazines' established just before or during the First World War; the subsequent discussion of this poetry in the critical reviews of the interwar period; culminating in the institutional consolidation of a revolutionary poetic moment in university textbooks and syllabuses after the Second World War.

Modernism evolved in symbiosis with a rapidly changing literary marketplace, in fear of, and hostile to, the mass reading publics of Europe and North America. As Lawrence Rainey has shown, the commercial imperatives faced by modernist poets entailed new strategies of publicity and marketing, involving micro-economies of their own, heavily dependent upon patronage or patron-investors (for example, the New York lawyer John Quinn) who underwrote so much of the literature we now call 'modernist'. Slim, expensive deluxe editions of avant-garde poetry were not simply objects of aesthetic contemplation but commodities on a luxury market, possessing a 'cultural capital' upon which authors might advance their literary careers. Publishers

and booksellers – the Egoist Press, the Hogarth Press, The Poetry Bookshop, Faber and Gwyer (later Faber and Faber) – targeted a tiny niche audience of poetry readers, often no more than a thousand strong, who wielded significant power as arbiters of cultural taste. These publishing institutions, then, began the work of shaping the lineaments of the modernist canon several years before university lecturers and their students were exposed to the startling innovations of the new poets. Modernist poetry was aimed at an unashamedly elitist or ‘highbrow’ readership of connoisseurs. Popularity was seen as a failure of nerve, rather than as a token of success.

Crucial to the cultural ecology of modernist publishing were the so-called ‘little magazines’ (including the *Little Review*, *Blast*, *The Egoist*) which not only served as showcases for poetry unsuitable for more commercial magazines, but as polemical forums stage-managing aesthetic controversy. Again, the readerships were exiguous (from a few hundred up to several thousand), but these unfolding debates were often noticed and taken up in more established periodicals, for example, the *Athenaeum* or the *Times Literary Supplement* in London, and in a variety of New York magazines, the *Dial* and the *New Republic*, even *Vanity Fair*. In such a manner, the audience for radical modernist poetry was broadened and fresh work brought into contact with the mainstream of literary discussion. The vitality and boldness of these little magazines and their significance in promoting new and experimental writers are striking features of the decade 1910 to 1920. Nonetheless, as recent scholars have demonstrated, the unacknowledged links, even complicity, between the avant-garde little magazines and the powerful forces of capitalist investment and speculation complicates the stridently oppositional jeremiads of modernist manifestoes. The formulation and marketing of a modernist poetic, the foundations of its later institutional canonisation, required subtle as well as less than subtle negotiations with, and interventions in, the dynamics of the cultural marketplace. It is no exaggeration to say that the 1929 Wall Street Crash had a sudden and profound effect upon the whole material economy of modernism.

The interwar period saw the appearance of a succession of monthly and quarterly magazines of a predominantly literary-critical nature (the *Criterion*, *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, *Scrutiny*, *Southern Review*). They were sober in style and format, demonstrating their continuity with the great Victorian reviews. Literary reviewing in these periodicals, the interpretation and evaluation of new works, had a vital role to play in the formation of the modernist canon. The distinctive profiles of these literary reviews of the interwar period, carrying critical articles of 2,000 to 6,000 words, reflected an important exchange between writers and overlapping, well-educated reading publics. The impact of these critical articles among networks of metropolitan

intellectuals or university-based readerships was reinforced by republication in book form. This work did a great deal to establish the reputations of many poets first published in the earlier, more ephemeral little magazines. By the 1930s, then, a modern criticism had grown up to expound and explicate the new poetic. At this time, the custodians of the literary canon were social elites of publishers, editors, men of letters and university professors, overwhelmingly middle-class in background and usually cautious or sceptical in their response to the range and novelty of the new poetry. The struggle for the institutional recognition and acceptance of modernist poetry was a slow and controversial process, reflecting larger-scale transformations in the constituency of the audience for serious contemporary literature, together with the reform of university curricula.

Fundamental to this changing sociology, effecting the promotion and reception of modernist poetry, was the exponential expansion of university departments of English after the Second World War. Modernist poetry was earnestly incorporated into the woof and warp of American and British syllabuses. The intrinsic difficulty of this work could be used to justify the pretensions of 'professional' literary studies, armed with its own specialised, esoteric terminology. Today, 'Modernist Studies' constitutes an enclave within the larger empires of literary and cultural studies: commitment to its fiercely contested canon of authors can seem like a conscious declaration of sociopolitical, rather than aesthetic, allegiances. Yet, academics possibly overestimate their power to reconfigure a canon that was formed outside the universities and extends beyond them, into the realms of literary journalism, of publishing and the media, not to mention the practices and preferences of poets and of readers. The modernist canon represents the consensus of institutional esteem in which some twentieth-century poets came to be held. Although this institutionalisation is authoritatively manifested in the secure position modernist poetry currently occupies in academic syllabuses, it is not identical with the profession of literary studies. As the following overview demonstrates, advocates of modernist poetry in Britain and America – university teachers or otherwise – faced distinct challenges in gaining acceptance for this work, especially during the crucial period from 1930 to 1950. In Britain, modernist poetry challenged the entrenched social mission to 'nationalise' literary studies. While in the United States, modernist poetry was reinterpreted in the light of liberal, instrumental imperatives designed to uncover a usable literary past.

It is hoped that this preliminary discussion dispels some of the misconceptions, and the mystique, that have clouded discussions of literary canons; a subject that has often generated more heat than light, more argument than insight. It is important to have a clear understanding of where the modernist

canon originated and how it was transmitted through an interlocking set of institutional practices, before embarking upon a detailed examination of this ideologically charged terrain. The account that follows is organised into four sections: the successful overturning of nineteenth-century canons of poetic taste; the proliferating canon of American modernisms; the construction of alternatives to modernism as the predominant paradigm of early twentieth-century poetry; and postmodern attempts to diversify the modernist canon, or to dismantle it altogether.

A revolutionary tradition

It is tempting to imagine that the modernist revolution in poetry might never have succeeded but for the noisy propaganda campaigns waged by Ezra Pound. By virtue of his connections with the little magazines – *Poetry* (Chicago), the *Little Review* and *The Egoist* – Pound was able to proselytise tirelessly on behalf of his friends. It was as one of Pound's protégés that T. S. Eliot burst upon the London literary scene. Pound's celebrated apologia ('Drunken Helots and Mr. Eliot'), his rude rejoinder to Arthur Waugh's attack on Eliot in the *Quarterly Review*, should be taken at less than face value. While it was true that many reviewers turned from Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) in bafflement, Pound was not alone in discerning this volume's remarkable mixture of wit, technical innovation and urban disaffection. May Sinclair, for instance, championed Eliot's 'elusive' genius by suggesting his poetry required a different kind of attention.¹ In fact, Pound and Eliot sought to establish principles for reading modern poetry founded upon the presentation of concrete particulars, or the 'objective correlative' (in Eliot's once-famous phrase).

The publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922 made an immediate and important impact: it constituted a notable publicity and marketing coup for modernist poetry. The poem was awarded the considerable \$2,000 annual literature prize from the *Dial*, largely thanks to the advocacy of Pound (he had emended it in typescript), who talked the poem up as the acme of the modernist movement in poetry since 1900. *The Waste Land* was discussed in the *Dial* in Edmund Wilson's perceptive article 'The Poetry of Drouth', which became the point of departure for an animated public debate about modernist poetry that ensued in the United States. The reaction of the English literary establishment was cooler, at times very hostile. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Edgell Rickword acknowledged Eliot's sophistication, but he pointed out that *The Waste Land*'s discontinuities placed excessive demands on the general reader. The influential middlebrow critic, J. C. Squire, claimed the poem was incomprehensible: 'A grunt would serve equally well.'² No

doubt such remarks enhanced Eliot's vogue among London's avant-garde circles. Appreciation of *The Waste Land* could serve as the cognoscenti's shibboleth.

Eliot's growing reputation as an avant-garde poet directed attention to his critical writings. *The Sacred Wood* (1920) was recommended by supporters as a demolition of Victorian and Georgian standards of taste. Although a provocative collection, it was widely admired by a generation of writers dissatisfied with prewar critical orthodoxies. These newer standards of criticism are on display in the trenchant articles and reviews Rickword printed in *The Calendar of Modern Letters* (1925–7). In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), Laura Riding and Robert Graves tore up the unwritten contract linking the poet to the general reading public: 'The modernist poet does not have to issue a program declaring his intentions toward the reader or to issue an announcement of tactics.'³ In effect, this combative criticism attempted to forcibly re-educate the audience for modern poetry. By 1932, Eliot's *Selected Essays*, opening with the key critical essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', staked his canonical claim to have renewed the English poetic 'tradition' with infusions from seventeenth-century dramatic verse and nineteenth-century French Symbolism. The magisterial tone of this essay cloaked an original polemical intent: it had first appeared in 1919 in the feisty little magazine *The Egoist*. The authority of his roles as editor of the *Criterion* (1922–39) and as a poetry director of Faber and Faber, could lead supporters to overlook the fact that Eliot approached his miscellaneous journalism as a programmatic defence of 'the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote'.⁴

Equally significant was the use made of Eliot's work in the burgeoning world of academic literary criticism. An important pioneer was I. A. Richards, who employed Eliot's poetry instrumentally in his Cambridge lectures to exemplify modern critical theories. Richards's 1926 article on Eliot, which benefited from discussions with the poet (during Eliot's Cambridge visit as Clark Lecturer), characterised *The Waste Land* as symptomatic of an era bereft of all beliefs. In 1929, F. R. Leavis supported Eliot in the *Cambridge Review* against condescending reviewers. At this time, Eliot's poetry had an enormous cachet with Cambridge students; an indication that he had begun to gain a foothold in British universities. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) contained praise of Eliot's early work, crediting him almost single-handedly (qualified approval was accorded to Gerard Manley Hopkins and Pound) with reorienting the path of English literary tradition after the enervated dream-worlds of nineteenth-century verse. That Eliot was unquestionably the major poet of the age was a common refrain in Leavis's embattled quarterly review, *Scrutiny* (1932–53), which found little

to celebrate in the poets of the Auden generation, or contemporary American poetry. *Scrutiny's* austere judgements had a formative influence on generations of British university students. It should be noted that *Scrutiny's* 'tradition' of twentieth-century poetry was unmistakably national in orientation, not internationalist.

Thanks to the so-called New Critics, modernist poetry acquired a considerable prominence in American universities. A diverse set of poet-critics (united chiefly by their rejection of the dominant trends in 1920s American criticism), the New Critics congregated around several spirited literary quarterlies: Robert Penn Warren's and Cleanth Brooks's *Southern Review* (1935–42), John Crowe Ransom's *Kenyon Review* (1939–59) and Allen Tate's *Sewanee Review* (1944–6). As theorists and apologists for modernist poetry, the New Critics paid particular attention to the formal complexity – paradox, tension and irony – of technique and metaphor. Tate was an early and partisan defender of *The Waste Land*. In a succession of original, penetrating essays published in the 1930s, R. P. Blackmur tackled the obscurity of modern poetry. This groundbreaking work was soon invested with a pedagogic intent. Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) unfolded a canon of modernist poets underpinned by Eliot's precepts and example: he praised their rediscovery of seventeenth-century 'wit' and eschewal of romantic afflatus. Furthermore, the textbook anthology plus commentary, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), written by Brooks and Warren, gradually transformed college teaching of English poetry in America. The textbook focused on examples of critical practice, on formalist close readings or 'explications' of short lyric poems. In 1950, Warren joined Brooks at Yale University. The huge impact of *Understanding Poetry* demonstrated that the New Criticism had been transplanted from advanced, but relatively isolated, literary circles to prestigious centres of institutional power.

By the 1940s, then, Eliot's followers had been decisive in shaping the canon of modernist poetry. Ambitious academics earned their spurs with explications of opaque or allusive poems that had earlier been frustrating by their capacity to resist discursive exposition. The appearance of *Four Quartets* (1935–42) gave fresh life to the business of pedagogical elucidation. However, the sombre religious brooding of the *Quartets*, together with the expression of anti-democratic sentiments in Eliot's cultural criticism, harmed his standing with a younger generation of poets. Still, Eliot's reputation as the modernist poet and critic *par excellence* was enshrined in countless university English departments (particularly in the United States) throughout the 1940s and 1950s. On the other hand, Pound's declining reputation touched bottom when he was imprisoned in Pisa on the charge of treason in 1945. Surviving the possibility of execution, his poignant record of breakdown,

The Pisan Cantos, was awarded the Bollingen Prize in 1948, sparking a heated controversy, not just regarding its literary value, but over the manner in which *The Cantos* addressed the obsessive themes of usury, anti-Semitism and fascism.

In 1948 Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, confirmation of his ascent to respectability. Helen Gardner's study *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949) placed the emphasis on the *Quartets* and not the radical experimentalism of the early poetry. Thus sanctified, the Anglo-Catholic royalist poet could be laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. In 1965, *Life* magazine recorded his passing by drawing a line under 'the Age of Eliot'. Yet the inevitable critical reaction that gathered momentum after his death failed to overturn the centrality of Eliot's writings to the canon of modernist poetry. Influential critical histories, from C. K. Stead's *The New Poetic* (1964) to Michael Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984), took Eliot's oeuvre as the culmination of the development of the modernist movement in poetry. In *The Pound Era* (1971), Pound's most brilliant exegete, Hugh Kenner, made a stimulating case for viewing modernism as the 'Pound Era', thereby encouraging the rehabilitation of this poet's chequered reputation. Furthermore, the publication of *The Waste Land* manuscripts in 1971 served to reinforce a widespread assumption that the focus of modernist poetry should fall on the collaboration of Eliot and Pound: above all, on their forbiddingly elliptical, allusive and polyglot long poems. A large number of critical studies in the 1980s orientated modernism firmly along the Pound–Eliot axis, often marginalising the work of other poets, and treating the later poetry of Yeats as the unexpected flowering of a hitherto minor aesthete. Some critics even suggested that it had been the amanuensis, Pound, who had influenced the master, Yeats – not vice versa.

The ghost of Pound's reckless politics, however, continued to trouble his critics. Numerous scholarly monographs published in the late 1980s and early 1990s were preoccupied with Pound's fascism. In 1995, Anthony Julius's 'adversarial' study of Eliot – an approach employing the rhetorical methods of a lawyer – contended that previous critics had studiously failed to address this poet's anti-Semitism. Recent attempts to align Pound and Eliot's writings with the norms of postmodern culture have routinely arraigned them on the grounds of anti-Semitism, fascism and misogyny. This abeyance of sympathy marks the current unwillingness to read these poets any longer on their own terms, or in the light of the formalist and ahistorical terms laid down by the New Critics; although some opponents have arguably been too eager to unmask distasteful illiberal opinions before allowing the poetry to speak with its full complexity of tone and nuance. Eliot and Pound have always had detractors as well as admirers. Their place at the heart of

the canon of Anglo-American modernist poetry will depend upon readers arriving at agreement about the existence of demonstrable merit in their works.

American modernisms

Several strands of American modernist poetry developed in conscious opposition to the example of Eliot and Pound. William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, for example, all expressed misgivings or discontent about Eliot's pre-eminence. In a sense, modernism had a more fertile soil in America in which to flourish than in Britain. The dynamic growth of urban and industrial America (above all in New York and Chicago) antiquated for modern poetry readers the anaemic turn-of-the-century 'genteel tradition' (to use George Santayana's pejorative phrase) that emanated from New England high culture. The founding in Chicago in 1912 of the monthly magazine *Poetry*, followed by the stridently avant-garde magazine the *Little Review* in 1914, revealed the emergence of a metropolitan intelligentsia receptive to the new styles of advanced American poetry. In 1917, Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* contained chapters on Edward Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and the 'Imagists', H.D. and John Gould Fletcher, but she paid scant attention to the American-born exiles Eliot and Pound. Eliot retaliated in *The Egoist* by suggesting the poets included in Lowell's new American canon were 'Laureates of some provincial Lycaenum'.⁵

Eliot's dismissal of contemporary American poetry was selectively reinforced by the New Critics. Blackmur rebuked E. E. Cummings for his 'sentimental denial of the intelligence'; he placed Marianne Moore as an 'idiosyncratic' poet and the poetry of Hart Crane as 'a great failure'.⁶ Notwithstanding their close personal friendship, Tate condemned Crane for his 'insulated egoism'.⁷ In a similar vein, the severe moralist Yvor Winters chastised Wallace Stevens as a 'hedonist'.⁸ Behind these canon-making value judgements was normally the assumption that modernist American poetry should be grafted on to European high civilisation; to ignore this rich cultural tradition was to appear, as Eliot put it, 'provincial'. The search for a guiding 'tradition' aligned Eliot with the avowedly reactionary cultural politics of the Southern Agrarian poet-critics, who contended that modernist poetry must stand aloof from the vulgar materialism of contemporary American mass democracy. Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* praised the Nashville 'Fugitive' poets – Ransom, Tate and Warren – for their urbane wit and refined ironies. Brooks largely ignored the New York-orientated modernisms of Williams, Stevens, Moore, Cummings and Crane. The interwar

polemics regarding an emergent canon of modernist American poets reveals a conflicted and confused field. Tate looked in sad awe at Crane's tragic career. Blackmur could admire aspects of Moore's quaintness. Winters praised some elements of Stevens's poetry. Still, these poets all struggled to achieve a secure place in the modernist canon. In the foreword to the 1950 edition of his popular and catholic anthology, *Modern American Poetry*, Louis Untermeyer asserted: 'Old standards have tottered; no new certitudes have been established.' His collection sought to exhibit 'the rich diversity of recent American poetry' though he claimed the book's contents highlighted the 'important poets'. The twentieth-century poets accorded more than twenty pages were E. A. Robinson, Sandburg, Frost, Eliot and Archibald MacLeish.⁹

Donald Hall's introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962) showed that the times were changing. Until recently, Hall argued, American poetry had been under the 'benevolent tyranny' of an orthodoxy 'derived from the authority of Eliot and the New Critics'. Hall quoted Williams's lament in his *Autobiography* (1951): '[*The Waste Land*] wiped out our world. . . . Eliot returned us to the classroom.' Hall stressed instead 'the line of William Carlos Williams' in present-day American poetry, drawing strength from the colloquial idioms of *Paterson* (1946–58).¹⁰ In *Poetry and the Age* (1953), the poet-critic Randall Jarrell had rejected academic 'orthodoxy' by championing the work of Frost, Williams, Moore and Stevens. One of the striking features of the 1950s was the rising reputation of Stevens, whose *Collected Poems* (1954) quickly attracted intensive attention. Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961) attempted to take stock of the recent upheavals. Pearce concluded that the modern American poet had a choice between two modes of development: the 'Adamic' impulse to freedom, represented by Stevens, and the 'mythic' call to community, best exemplified by the theocentric Eliot. Although Pearce hinted at a synthesis between these traditions, the major trend in American academic criticism in the following two decades could be construed as a concerted reaction against Eliot, by a movement that exalted Stevens as the supreme poet of the century.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of critics associated with Yale and Johns Hopkins universities – Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller – attempted to 'deconstruct' the hegemony of the modernist canon institutionalised by the New Critics. In a succession of dense theoretical writings, these critics approached Stevens as a philosophical poet, or perhaps as a philosopher of poetry, whose writings wrestled with the phenomenological and the existential dilemmas facing modern man. Bloom argued that Stevens and Crane were the 'inheritors and continuators' of a tradition of romantic visionaries and the truly canonical figures of

twentieth-century poetry in English, unlike Eliot and Pound, whom he provocatively suggested might turn out to be the 'Cowley and Cleveland of this age'.¹¹ Hartman also extolled Stevens as the great romantic poet of the period. Hillis Miller brooded upon the responses of Stevens and Williams to the terrifying absence of God's apparent withdrawal from the world. Miller suggested that Stevens sought to recover a divinely immanent universe through his poetic fictions; the materiality of Williams's signifiers constituted a more radical gesture towards the end of ontology. The Yale critics consciously disregarded the postulation of authorial intentions if they appeared to contradict their speculative interpretations, a procedure that troubled more conservative critics, but was seen as liberating by fellow post-structuralists. It is very likely that the subtle commentaries of Frank Kermode and Helen Vendler have done as much to secure Stevens's canonical standing in Britain and the United States as the freer and more fugitive readings of the Yale critics.

It would be wrong to think, however, that Stevens's belated entrance to the canon of modernist poets had somehow supplanted Eliot, who continues to receive detailed and varied forms of canonical attention. Denis Donoghue resisted challenges to Eliot mounted by proponents of Stevens, by claiming that his academic colleagues betrayed in their critiques of Eliot an undeclared antipathy towards religious belief. According to Donoghue, Stevens's existential preoccupation with human consciousness was not *prima facie* raw material for a superior poetry. Beyond that, many serious readers of twentieth-century poetry have resisted a factitious either/or between Stevens and Eliot. Other critics – Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff foremost amongst them – have argued for the continuing importance of the 'Poundian tradition' in American poetry, an inheritance transmitted to contemporary avant-garde poetics through the work of Pound's admirers, Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivists. The horns of Perloff's essay 'Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?' (1982) might appear as reductive and unhelpful as the binary opposition between followers of Stevens and Eliot, but it does bear witness to an ongoing debate about the relative importance of canonical authors.

The road not taken

The contours of the canon we have been tracing can also be viewed from the outside; that is, in terms of the poets who have been excluded from it in the synoptic sweep of important studies of a modernist 'tradition' of Anglo-American poetry. It is worth recalling that, in the eyes of many contemporaries, the major English poets writing in the mid-1920s were not Pound and Eliot but Thomas Hardy, Yeats and Robert Bridges, along with those poets

collected in Edward Marsh's popular anthologies *Georgian Poetry* (five volumes; 1912–22). Hardy and Yeats in particular were begetters of distinctive traditions which have proved, in many ways, as fruitful as the traditions originating from Eliot and Pound. The spectacle of Yeats remaking his poetic personae after the publication of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), most notably in *The Tower* (1928), has attracted legions of younger enthusiasts. Whether or not this refashioning is properly called 'modernist' (Yeats described himself as one of the 'last romantics') is another matter. Yeats's lofty, mannered, anecdotal introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) is a case in point – the prologue to its decidedly idiosyncratic contents. Yeats devoted more space to Dorothy Wellesley and Laurence Binyon than to Eliot and Pound. The principal torch bearers of the modern movement in English poetry in this anthology appeared to be W. J. Turner, Edith Sitwell and Herbert Read. At the same time, Eliot paid careful attention to the composition of Michael Roberts's *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), a bold reordering of the landscape of contemporary poetry beginning with Hopkins (by contrast, Yeats had opened with Walter Pater), excluding Hardy and the Georgians, and printing substantial offerings from the work of Pound, Eliot, later Yeats, and Auden. Published simultaneously, the Faber collection soon eclipsed its Oxford rival, shaping (in the words of the poet Anne Ridler) 'the taste of a generation'.¹²

Though *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* laid out a canon there were dissenters. In a series of polemical studies published throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the American poet and critic Yvor Winters bitterly berated the false turn taken by modern poetry. Winters excoriated the modernist poets for their obscurantism and irrationality, denoted by what he called 'the fallacy of imitative form': that is, the mistaken belief that a chaotic world can be mirrored artistically by chaotic form. Principal proponents of the fallacy – Eliot, Cummings, Stevens, and especially Pound ('a barbarian loose in a museum') – were scolded in Winters's sweeping and unsparing literary judgements.¹³ Put bluntly, Winters abhorred the moral 'decadence' exhibited by modernist poetry.

Though the English poet and critic Donald Davie thought that Winters's valuation of Bridges, Thomas Sturge Moore and Elizabeth Daryush as the major poets of the age was quite eccentric, his own irascible brand of counter-modernism owed something to Winters's stern example. In *Articulate Energy* (1955), Davie stringently examined symbolist theory and practice, finding them both wanting. He warned of the dangers poets courted when they dislocated or abandoned conventional syntax. *Articulate Energy* closed with a plea for modern poetry to ground itself once more in human experience, or the 'reek of humanity'.¹⁴ This devaluation of symbolist poetics, an implicit

defence of the British Movement poets of the 1950s, had consequences for the redrawing of the map of modern poetry.

Perhaps the best of the revisionist literary histories published in the late 1950s was Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* (1957), a closely argued attempt to trace the preservation of romantic concepts and motifs (the isolation of the artist, the image) in the theories of the avowedly anti-romantic modernists. This study contended that T. E. Hulme's theory of the Image revealed the complex interrelationship of symbolism and modernism. Kermode's analysis cast doubt upon Eliot's symbolist historiography, the 'dissociation of sensibility', which had been used to assail the reputations of Milton and the romantic poets. Kermode's close reading of Yeats's 'Among School Children' attended to the poem's 'romantic' elements and to its climactic symbolist images of tree and dancer. Drawing freely on historical scholarship to support its conclusions, *Romantic Image* extended the insights of Edmund Wilson, another appreciative but judiciously sceptical critic of the symbolist-modernist retreat into esoteric artistic symbols. By the later 1950s, then, the continuity of modern poetry was increasingly claimed as a romantic survival. The case was put most forcefully in Graham Hough's *Image and Experience* (1960). Hough claimed that Imagist principles had debilitated the work of Eliot, Pound and Stevens by severing their work from a vital relationship with a wider audience. With breathtaking audacity, Hough contended that these poets had been a fascinating but ultimately fruitless diversion from the central (romantic) tradition of modern English poetry: namely, Hardy, Frost, Graves and John Betjeman. *Image and Experience* characterised modernist poetry as an ill-advised 'détour, a diversion from the main road'.¹⁵

This critical reaction or 'counter-revolution' (as Kermode termed it) broadened the terms of the debate about the canon of modernist poetry. The publication of James Reeves's Penguin anthology *Georgian Poetry* (1962) hastened a historically informed reappraisal of these poets. In *The Georgian Revolt* (1965), Robert H. Ross sought to unsettle the 'ridiculously oversimplified'¹⁶ assumptions about the nature of Georgian poetry. He discovered that, far from being mere pseudo-pastoralists, the Georgians had extended the subject matter and diction of modern poetry, especially in the years 1911 to 1915. But the harsh criticisms of Eliot and Leavis, allied to the disenchantment felt by a postwar generation of British critics, inflicted lasting damage on the reputations of the Georgians. Stead's *The New Poetic* gave serious attention to the innovations of a few of the poets published in the Georgian anthologies (including Rupert Brooke, D. H. Lawrence, Siegfried Sassoon and Graves), yet the movement was essentially pigeonholed as prewar and therefore outside the charmed circle of the 1920s 'high modernism' – a term gaining increasing critical currency in American universities during

the 1970s – which had apparently descended from the Imagist movement. The privileged pre-eminence of modernism, let alone of ‘high’ modernism, was never unanimous and did not pass unchallenged by independent-minded critics and poets.

Davie’s *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1972) proposed Hardy (rather than Eliot, Pound or Yeats) as the most far-reaching influence on British poetry during the last half-century. Hardy and his heirs – Lawrence, Auden, Philip Larkin – represented a rejection of the eclectic internationalism of modernism, showing the divergence of British and American poetic traditions. This cultural chauvinism was reinforced by Larkin’s *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973), which reprinted twenty-seven poems by Hardy, followed numerically by Yeats (nineteen poems), Auden (sixteen poems), Rudyard Kipling (thirteen poems), Lawrence and Betjeman (twelve poems each). According to Davie, the ambition of American poetry since William Carlos Williams to sever all ties with English poetry accounted for the very different tastes of postwar readers of British and American poetry. Whereas post-Second World War American poetry has been self-consciously ‘post-modern’, that term has had a rather different resonance in the context of *English* poetry. The discrepancy begs a question about the appropriateness of the retrospective valorisation of 1920s ‘high modernism’ as the high-watermark of Anglo-American poetry. The term carries with it the implication that anything not classed as ‘high’ or ‘modernist’ is necessarily of inferior quality. Not so for Davie, who could combine an admiration for Pound with admiration for Edward Thomas; or for Christopher Ricks, a subtle exegete of Eliot’s poetry as well as of the dissimilar talent of A. E. Housman.

Hardy, Frost and Yeats continue to attract supporters who argue for their place in the front rank of achievement in twentieth-century English poetry. Although it is sometimes proposed, it is debatable whether their prestige has been enhanced by academic critics who feel the need to bestow the honorific adjective ‘modernist’ upon them. Indicative of the complexity of the debates surrounding the literary history of modernism are the essays Blackmur contributed to the special issues of the *Southern Review* devoted to Hardy (1940) and Yeats (1941). Attempting to order Hardy’s poetry into ‘some sort of canon’, Blackmur complained of a fanatical ‘thicket of ideas, formulas, obsessions, indisciplined compulsions’.¹⁷ Blackmur contrasted Hardy with Yeats, whose peculiar mythical paradigm – *A Vision* (first edition, 1925) – was absorbed into the texture of his poems. For all the occult byways, Blackmur still praised the iconoclast Yeats as ‘the greatest poet in English since the seventeenth century’.¹⁸ The quietly meditative poetry of Frost has been equally difficult to assimilate into tidy-minded narratives of modernist

poetry. In his *A History of Modern Poetry* (two volumes, 1976 and 1987), David Perkins defended Frost against narrow modernist standards or norms. He claimed that Frost had written 'the finest short narrative poems yet written in the 20th-century'.¹⁹

Opening up the canon

The modernist canon, like all literary canons, is open-ended and amenable to change. During the past thirty years or so, the most sustained assault on the canon has arisen from an accusation that the institutions central to canon-formation have deliberately privileged the claims of white, male authors while covertly excluding non-whites and female writers. The aggressively partisan 'culture wars' that have been fought in North American and British universities since the 1970s have attempted to 'open up' the canon to hitherto marginal figures, sometimes with the express aim of dismantling the cultural elitism implied by a select canon. The enormous expansion of university English departments after the Second World War has rendered undergraduate reading lists a revealing indicator of revisionist intentions. Academic syllabuses cannot dislodge an author from the canon; that is, unless a corresponding crisis of faith takes place in the interlocking institutional networks of publishing, scholarship, literary journalism and reviewing. Still, a core canon of white, male modernist poets has been most forcefully contested and unsettled by the revisionist zeal exhibited in (mainly North American) college classrooms, struggles reflecting larger sociocultural changes in the profile of instructors and students at institutions of higher education. This polemical intent was signalled in Houston A. Baker and Leslie Fiedler's *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon* (1981), a collection that sought to inaugurate a wide-ranging interrogation of the class, gender and ethnic identities of canonical authors. Habitually motivated by explicitly ideological agendas, attempts to preserve or to open up the modernist canon have been tendentious.

African-American poets participated in modernist movements, notably in New York throughout the 1920s, yet black poets were conspicuous by their absence from the modernist canon. Neither Geoffrey Moore's *Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (1954) nor Oscar Williams's *Anthology of American Verse* (1955) contained a single black author among over a hundred poets represented. In 1969, Donald Hall observed pointedly: 'A world of black poetry exists in America alongside the world of white poetry, exactly alike in structure – with its own publishers, bookstores, magazines, editors, anthologists, conferences, poetry readings – and almost entirely invisible to the white world. Like the rest of the black world. The world of white poetry

has practised the usual genteel apartheid of tokenism.’²⁰ Whether or not it is correctly described as tokenism, Untermeyer’s anthologies of *Modern American Poetry* published work by three black poets from the modernist era – James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. By 1977, Moore had added Hughes, Cullen and Gwendolyn Brooks to his Penguin anthology. In the wake of the 1960s civil rights movement, scholarly attention was directed to the work of black American writers, including the group of intellectuals associated with the literary salons and coteries of Harlem, New York. The epithet ‘Harlem Renaissance’ gives too strong a sense of uniformity to a disparate group of writers, but it does highlight the existence of lively and innovative circles of advanced black writing that interacted with American modernist poets. It does seem incontrovertible that black poets faced material difficulties that militated against the wider dissemination of their work, in forms that are quite dissimilar from the situation of white poets. As Gwendolyn Brooks remarked in her foreword to *New Negro Poets* (1964), black poets have ‘spoken racially’ and have ‘offered race-fed testimony’.²¹ The questions of race and ideology confronted by African-American poets in the interwar period has tended to, and may continue to, place their poetry in a different category from the rarefied, verbal icons celebrated as ‘high modernism’. For instance, the experimental blues poetry of Langston Hughes – sometimes proposed as the most gifted of the Harlem Renaissance poets – is grounded in a social and political consciousness easily distinguishable from the modernisms of Eliot, Stevens or Moore. The appearance of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr and Nellie Y. McKay, suggests a strenuous advocacy of autonomy, rather than a desire for inclusion within a multiethnic or multicultural canon.

Unquestionably the greatest restructuring of the modernist canon over the past thirty years has been the recovery of neglected women writers. Throughout the 1970s feminist critics attacked the gender bias of an elitist, restrictive, male-centred literary canon. In 1978, Elaine Showalter declared ‘the lost continent of the female tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature’.²² The work of reclamation was undertaken in numerous revisionist accounts of modernist literary history. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *No Man’s Land* (three volumes; 1988, 1989 and 1994) launched a radical critique of the misogyny of a masculine literary tradition, championing instead the flowering of an oppositional, feminist modernist poetics. A critical anthology, *The Gender of Modernism* (1990), edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, attempted to reconfigure the modernist canon with chapters on some twenty-six authors, including the poets Djuna Barnes, Nancy Cunard, H.D., Mina Loy, Rose Macaulay, Charlotte Mew, Marianne Moore, May

Sinclair, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Anna Wickham. *The Gender of Modernism* usefully extended the breadth of the discussions over canonical modernism, preparing the climate for what Scott described as the goal of postmodern feminists to refigure or reweave a tangled mesh of modernists. Scholarly accounts of woman-centred publishing networks based in London, Paris and Chicago have added greatly to understanding the diversity and complexity of modernist literature. The debates arising out of this recent research have been fruitful, though the female poets discussed in *The Gender of Modernism* have, in common with their male counterparts, encountered resistance in gaining admittance to the canon.

An obvious candidate for canonical election is Hilda Doolittle or H.D., whose early Imagist poetry had received serious attention from Richards and Blackmur, and was included in the standard literary histories of Stead, Kenner and Levenson. After the publication of H.D.'s posthumous *Collected Poems* (1983), containing a mass of previously unpublished work, attention was directed to her longer, meditative poems. Critical monographs by Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis stressed H.D.'s difference from male contemporaries, viewing her writing as the articulation of the physical experience of women that has been marginalised in a patriarchal world of publishing; although Lawrence Rainey has disputed these claims by suggesting that H.D.'s aesthetic valuation would be considerably lower were it not for the patronage of her immensely wealthy lover, Winifred Ellerman, who enthusiastically promoted her work to a privileged coterie audience. Uncertainty about canonical stature has also accompanied the critical discussion of two female poets intimately associated with the avant-garde communities fuelling modernist experimentation in the arts – Mina Loy and Nancy Cunard. Loy has perhaps fared better of the two as a fellow traveller in Marjorie Perloff's prewar 'Futurist moment'. Cunard's *Parallax* was dismissed by Leavis in the epilogue to *New Bearings in English Poetry* as merely derivative of *The Waste Land*. Her reputation was further damaged in conservative circles by her political activism. Nevertheless, the inclusion of both Loy and Cunard's poetry in Rainey's Blackwell anthology, *Modernism* (2005), should help to ensure their continued attention before the broad conclave of canonical electors. On the other hand, Rainey omitted Laura Riding, an author who has done as much as any female writer to shape the reception of modernist poetry; though it is no longer true, as Martin Dodsworth complained in 1994, that this original poet endures an 'invisible status' in literary histories.²³

A modernist canon forged in London and New York, then enshrined in the elite institutions of England and the United States, has been accused of being

reluctant to acknowledge the merits of the Scotsman Hugh MacDiarmid, the Northumbrian Basil Bunting, the Irishmen Thomas MacGreevy, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, the Welsh poets Dylan Thomas and Lynette Roberts, and the Anglo-Welsh poet David Jones (Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Poetry* was unusual for the number of Celtic poets represented in its pages). In *Repression and Recovery* (1989), Cary Nelson argued that a traditional modernist canon had subjugated many American poets on the basis of their class, race or gender. Given the incompatible premises, values and requirements upheld by social institutions and pressure groups, attempts to formulate a select canon will inevitably be a contentious undertaking. It is natural that the reputations of writers should be pressed into the service of redirecting contemporary cultural debates. This *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* seeks to extend the boundaries of canonical modernism to the larger Anglophone world of Commonwealth and Caribbean poetry.

In an intriguing case of a canonical poacher turned gamekeeper, Harold Bloom deplored the Balkanisation of the western literary canon proposed by an egregious 'School of Resentment' (feminism, deconstruction, new historicism). Unresolved ideological competition or conflict, however, may be a healthy state of affairs in the cultural conversations of a democratic society, not necessarily a symptom of disabling instability. The establishment of the modernist canon in Anglo-American universities could never guarantee that it would be taught in a way that effectively or consistently transmitted the values of any monolithic institutional power – nor is it clear why the preservation (through the institutions of education, publishing and journalism) of what modern, pluralist democratic societies deem valuable can be clearly identified with a repressive, homogeneous 'dominant' ideology. On the other hand, egalitarian cultural politics runs the risk of endorsing what Tocqueville lamented as the indiscriminating 'hypocrisy of luxury' of affluent democracies. As systematic records of a discernible consensus about the assessment of achievement, a literary canon is a fundamentally inequalitarian concept.

The modernist canon of poets has shown itself to be dynamic and elastic enough to accommodate a new variety and proportion without sacrificing the hierarchical principle of judging the excellent from the less good. The specific sociohistorical forces shaping the story of this canon do not obviate the ongoing critical necessity to find strong arguments to uphold it as a set of institutional practices. As we have seen, proponents and opponents of modernist poetry alike have debated the literary *value* of individual authors with remarkable vehemence. These questions of interpretation, and of evaluation, are essential to the survival of the modernist canon. According to Kermode,

since works of art cannot speak for themselves, cadres of commentators are required to disentangle knowledge from opinion and to recommend subtle distinctions between what ought and what ought not to be let go. Although these critical elites are increasingly to be found working in universities, it is salutary to close by reflecting on Samuel Johnson's celebrated dictum that 'after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning', the 'claim to poetical honours' rests ultimately upon readers 'uncorrupted with literary prejudices'.²⁴ It is sentimental and futile to wish away the specialisation of twenty-first-century intellectual life, yet 'claim to poetical honours' might indeed depend not solely upon an army of university specialists, but on the continuing human appeal of canonical works to a diverse corpus of poetry readers.

NOTES

1. See Jewel Spears Brooker (ed.), *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 3–6, 10–13.
2. Brooker (ed.), *T. S. Eliot*, p. 115.
3. Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1927), p. 124.
4. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 16.
5. T. S. Eliot, 'Disjecta Membra', *The Egoist* 5.4 (April 1918), 55.
6. R. P. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), pp. 318, 283, 316.
7. Allen Tate, *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York: Swallow, 1948), p. 228.
8. Yvor Winters, *In Defence of Reason* (Denver: Swallow, 1947), p. 445.
9. Louis Untermeyer (ed.), *Modern American Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950).
10. Donald Hall, 'Introduction', *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 25.
11. Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. v.
12. Anne Ridler, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', in Michael Roberts (ed.), *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 35.
13. Yvor Winters, *Primitivism and Decadence* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1937) and *In Defense of Reason & On Modern Poets* (New York: Meridian, 1959).
14. Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 161–5.
15. Graham Hough, *Image and Experience* (London: Duckworth, 1960), p. 56.
16. Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. vii.
17. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture*, pp. 51–2.
18. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture*, p. 123.
19. David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 232.
20. Hall, 'Introduction', *Contemporary American Poetry*, p. 37.

21. Gwendolyn Brooks, 'Foreword', *New Negro Poets: USA* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 13.
22. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago Press, 1978), p. 10.
23. Martin Dodsworth, *The Penguin History of Literature: The Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 221.
24. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1781; London: Frederick Warne, 1872), pp. 501-2.